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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the history and current state of Japanese cooperative learning techniques in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) education for Japanese junior high school students is surveyed, and an empirically-based argument is made in favor of using BAZU (BUZZ) techniques. The past and current methods of teaching English in Japan have left students with little confidence in their ability to speak English and correspondingly little interest in learning more. Buzz Learning is a cooperative theory based on the premise that depends on the interactive human relationships of the learners. It operates on the empirically demonstrated fact that the meaningful use of these interpersonal relationships makes independent and effective learning possible. The group and cooperative basis of Buzz Learning helps students to learn from one another and can be effective in mitigating characteristics attributed to Japanese learners, such as shyness and group consciousness. The introduction of Buzz Learning techniques at the junior high school level has resulted in dramatically improved reading ability, an augmented ability to learn by themselves, fewer students with inferiority complexes, and students learning out of curiosity rather than just obligation. (KFT)

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Implementation of Buzz Learning to English Language Education in a Junior High School

Inoue Tetsuro

In this paper, I report the current state of the application of a Japanese cooperative learning technique in English education for Japanese junior high schools.

I believe that introducing cooperative learning techniques to English language education will be useful and beneficial. It can be used as a device to overcome negative elements of traditional language education in Japan. Currently, in almost all Japanese public junior high schools, students study basic English for three years, from the ages of 13 to 15. Even under these circumstances where English has been introduced early in the students' lives, English teachers still have difficulties in the class and the reasons behind these problems, I believe, relate to the way English is taught.

English Language Education and Problems before WWII

Period Where Students Learned Subjects in English

The earliest application of English education in Japan is accredited to Yukichi Fukuzawa. During a visit to the United States in 1886, Fukuzawa realized the serious need for English language learning for Japanese students who at that

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time shied away from new concepts. In the Meiji era (1868-1912), Western study had been introduced and, except for medicine and law, subjects were taught in English. At that time, visiting foreign teachers of higher education gave lessons in English, and even some Japanese teachers gave their lessons in English. However, Japanese teachers had experienced teaching foreign languages previously, since Chinese had been taught in Japanese schools. For teaching Chinese, the Japanese invented a system of tokenizing or labeling the words in a sentence in order to understand the Chinese. To each word in a sentence, in the order the word occurred within the sentence, a token was appended. Each token described characteristics about each word. This system was purely mechanical and completely disregarded pronunciation. In many instances the same mechanism was applied to the teaching of English since word order in Chinese is symmetric with that of English. Consider the following examples from a textbook of that time:

The (1) man (3) has a (2) whip.

(6) All (1) you (5) will (4) have (3) to (2) do (9) is (8) to (7) try.

The English pronunciation of Japanese teachers was quite strange. A report describes some unusual pronunciations such as *to-n-gyu* for "tongue" and *a-ni-ki* for "unique." The number of Japanese teachers who could give lessons in Japanese—translated from English sources—gradually increased. In the beginning of the 20th century, teaching lessons in Japanese was approved and English was not considered as an essential means of study; rather it became one of the academic subjects like geography, history, physics, or chemistry.

Examinations and English

In the Meiji era, high educational credentials were a passport to a successful career. Public education had rapidly spread to all segments of society and an increasing number of people desired to enter higher education while the hereditary system was collapsing. In response, the entry criteria for higher education institutions became tougher. The questions on the selection exam became more difficult. Some example sentences in the reference book for an entrance examination at that time are:

"It is in man as in soils, where sometimes there is a vein of gold which the owner knows not of."

"Leaves are to the plant what lungs are to the animal"

Difficult exam questions focused on reading comprehension of given passages. Factors such as pronunciation, English cultural background, cultural value, or even elementary grammar were disregarded.

In 1922, Harold E. Palmer came to Japan and introduced the "oral method" to improve the current teaching methods. With a worsening relationship between the United States of America and Japan in the 1930s, English became a "hostile language," which became excluded from the educational field and was taught only in a limited number of places.

English Language Education and Problems after WWII

In March 1946 immediately after the end of the Second World War, the first American educational mission was dispatched to occupied Japan and produced several policies to normalize and democratize postwar public education in Japan. English education was paramount, and led the new trend in education.

The educational ideals of English can be seen in the proposal for a course of study:

(1) It is important to get into the habit of thinking in English.

(2) The primary skills are listening and speaking in English.

(3) The secondary skills are reading and writing in English.

(4) It is important to understand English-speaking people, especially their manners, customs, and ordinary life.

In addition to the points above, the course of study underscores that it is not appropriate to put more than thirty people in a class and the ideal is to have one lesson every day and six lessons per week. However reality did not meet with these ideals. The class size was generally greater than fifty and the number of instructional classes decreased gradually from six to a low of three per week within only a few years (currently it stands at four lessons per week).

During the higher education boom following the postwar economic growth, English became a perfect examination subject. English proficiency was a shortcut to a job with a big firm. While there was a decrease in the number of English lessons, there was an increase in demand for schools to teach a greater number of subjects in a short period of time. Teaching methods for big classes were regimented. In essence, the teacher instructed and the student learned, in limited one way interaction between student and teacher. Entrance examinations focused on descriptive questions, hence teachers concentrated on the writing and the reading comprehension of passages. Thus students had limited opportunity to practice conversation and learn expressions used in real life and had to deal with advanced grammar and complex texts to satisfy exam requirements. They even were asked questions about pronunciation and intonation in written form.

The requirement that students had to learn advanced subject matter in a limited amount of time resulted in an increasing number of students being left

behind. Moreover, parents paid to send their children to cram schools and/or hired private tutors and bought extra teaching materials to be used at home due to the increasing importance of English learning. The result was a resurrection of the pre-Meiji era structure of learning English.

The Current English Language Education Situation

Under the circumstances described above, many students lose their confidence and their interest in learning English. Even for pupils who are able to keep up with advanced learning, it is difficult to maintain a learning balance.

First-year junior high school students who learn English at the outset with a high degree of willingness and enthusiasm get tired of having to learn English words by heart and of being required to complete large amounts of homework. Gradually they neglect their English studies. The more irritated and uneasy they feel about the fact that they are behind the others, the more apathetic they become about learning English. In fact, some of these students keep their faces down on their desk for the duration of the 50 minute class while others talk to other classmates and disrupt the class. Demotivated and motivated students coexist in the same class. The normal flow of the lesson is broken due to the teacher's continuous scolding and the students' chatting. Hence, there is a definite need to improve the interpersonal relationships among the students and teachers in the classroom. Therefore as a means of solving these problems, I decided to introduce "Buzz Learning" based on cooperative principles to my lessons.

Aims of Introducing Buzz Learning

A Description of Buzz Learning

Yoshihisa Shioda, a pedagogical psychologist, proposed *Buzz Learning* in 1962. Buzz Learning is a cooperative learning theory of how to teach using small groups. It focuses on the premise that the basis of learning depends on the interactive human relationships of the learners. Buzz Learning operates on the principle—based on actual classroom data—that the meaningful use of these interpersonal relationships makes independent and effective learning possible.

Buzz Learning was first introduced as a solution to worsening educational circumstances in which junior high school students showed no interest in learning and were disruptive or did not participate in the lesson. Overwhelming courses and the coexistence of demotivated and motivated students in the same classroom resulted in problems similar to those of English education in the Meiji era.

Aims in Introducing Buzz Learning

My aims in introducing Buzz Learning to my English classes were:

(1) Learners link up in groups for the same purposes. In the process of acting as groups, they encourage and help each other.

(2) Learners work on learning tasks, supporting individuals with their weak points and accommodating differences in ability.

(3) The learning environment is such that indispensable communication training in language learning can take place.

(4) Characteristics attributed to Japanese learners such as shyness and group consciousness are avoidable to some degree.

(5) Groups of learners produce an atmosphere where they have spontaneous responsibility for their own learning under controlled conditions.

In short, my aims were to inspire those refusing to learn, to encourage those concentrating on only writing and comprehending to participate actively in lively English learning again, and to determine to what degree we could overcome the educational imbalance caused by the overwhelming curriculum and competitive examinations.

Examples of English Lessons Using Buzz Learning

Measures Devised to Deal with a Problematic School/Student Environment

The junior high school introduced in this paper is in a suburb of a middle-sized city. The region consists of a business district, residential areas, and fields. The junior high school is of average size for such a school in a Japanese medium-sized town, with 13 classes and 500 students in a three year course.

The area has been urbanized and is attracting people from other cities as well as large capital investments. With the number of large department stores rapidly growing, the number of instances of juvenile shoplifting as well as teens prowling the city at night are increasing.

There are various problems with the junior high school students that have worsened in the last three years. Even though over half the students go to cram schools, the students seldom have basic knowledge and learning habits. Quite a few have low confidence in their grades. The motivation of the students to learn is very low. Some students do not even bring a textbook or paper to the classroom, some do no homework and fail to prepare for the next class, others chat during class. There is no academic atmosphere in the class.

English classes are no exception. The students do not speak, read, write, or express themselves. They don't do anything so that the proper lessons are not effectively carried out. At the beginning of the second year 40% of the students cannot write all the alphabet completely. Over 20% are not able to write basic words such as ***book***, ***dog***, or ***desk***. Even quite a few advanced students keep

their faces down on the desk for the duration of the 50 minute class. The teachers are exhausted from speaking loudly and repeatedly scolding students throughout the lessons.

To prepare myself for the above situation, I disciplined myself to be a teacher who considers the students' viewpoints and imagines how they think. I considered several points:

(1) Do not be one-sided and just scold the student—try to also see the student's perspective.

(2) Do not get angry with students who did not prepare for the lesson, like forgetting to clean the blackboard.

(3) Do not feel sad despite the fact that the students do not have the textbook on their desks.

(4) Do not make sarcastic remarks by saying that even elementary school students at least bring a pencil.

(5) Make a consistent effort to listen to the students even if I feel disturbed by what I am hearing.

I understand the insistence of the students who suddenly scream in the middle of the class to try to show their existence. I encourage students with low self-esteem to answer questions and I praise them for their good points. If someone does not understand, I teach them individually. After just a month, the class environment improved with this new approach and the students changed their behavior. They realized that the teacher comes to class to teach them English rather than to tell them off. The realization that the teacher is there to aid them helps the student to trust the teacher. Under these circumstances cooperative learning is ready to be practiced.

Three Examples of Buzz Learning in English Class

Practice for Rapid Reading—A Learning Activity in Pairs

This section introduces a cooperative learning pairwork exercise in reading textbooks. The aims for the students are as follows:

(1) To foster understanding by reading a chunk of meaning as quickly as possible.

(2) To naturally learn essential phonetics of English.

(3) To repeatedly practice appropriate sound volume and adequate mouth movements.

(4) To improve reading aloud skills through continuous practice.

(5) To enjoy reading English and feel satisfied with the task in a serious and comfortable environment with a chosen partner.

Procedure:

(1) Practice basic pronunciation by using the teacher's pronunciation as the model (whole class).

(2) Put slash marks in the text according to breath groups (teacher should instruct how to do this first).

(3) Individually practice each breath group in rapid reading.

(4) Pair students according to the students' relationships and reading abilities.

(5) Loudly read fixed passages in the book sentence by sentence. In this step students should listen to one another to check articulation of words, reading smoothly until the end or comma, and being aware of breath groups.

(6) Point out students' weak points and correct them. Students should call a teacher if necessary.

(7) After repeating this sort of exercise, each student measures the speed of reading of each passage. They do it several times and record their best results on a card. The outcomes of the implementation in cooperative rapid reading practice are:

(a) The students start to set clear goals and seriously deal with articulation practice.

(b) Taught adequately over time slower students become more willing to learn. The slow students tend to make more progress.

(c) For those who can read to some degree, clarify any unclear points and help to improve their ability. These students will also have teaching experience so they can participate in the class more spontaneously.

(d) With an independent learning experience, the students get used to autonomously doing other tasks in English.

Refined Translation: Practical Use of the Basic Buzz Learning Theory

In the limited time available for English lessons, a translation task from English to Japanese can be carried out through a word replacement drill. For this exercise there is a need to attempt to positively draw out high level skills to refine the translations, taking into account the reading's cultural aspects and the way of thinking expressed in the reading selection.

After the students have practiced reading aloud with a partner and using simple grammar passages in a small group, an attempt to refine the translation is made. Here are some of the goals of the exercise:

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(1) To help students increase their comprehension by common sense, experience, and the knowledge of other students.

(2) To perform complicated tasks that have to be done by more than one person through group discussion.

(3) To complete tasks by asking questions.

(4) To enable students to explain their opinions.

(5) To spontaneously learn with intellectual desire.

(6) To experience the effectiveness of group learning.

Students in a group individually translate an English passage assigned by their teacher in their notebooks. The group members then put their desks together and discuss the translation. Discussions are guided by group leaders who call the other members to discuss in order. The selected student presents his or her translation and points out unclear parts. The group progresses towards the correct translation through discussion. Consider the set of sample sentences followed by an example of a possible discussion:

Sentence to Translate: *They are not shy when they are born. But they become shy because they want to be good boys and girls.*
Group leader: So, Mr. Tsuneji, please introduce your translation.
Tsuneji: (Reads his translation) I did not quite understand the actual meaning of "because they want to be good boys and girls."
Group leader: Is there anyone who translates this part differently?
Yoshio: I think it means that they have to behave themselves.
Group leader: Any other opinions?
Mariko: I have different opinion. It expresses that if one does something different from others he/she feels ashamed so he/she tries to act as others do.
Group leader: How about all of you?
Haruo: Well, you mean, it describes the tendency of group consciousness, like many Japanese do.
Mariko: Yes.
Group leader: Well then. Is her translation all right?
Group members: Agree.
Group leader: Shall we go on to the next sentence?

Afterward, each group presents their translation to the whole class. In case there is a difference in the translation, the teacher adds explanations to the student notes. The students then make adjustments in reference to these notes to their translations.

The instruction has been successful in changing the students' learning mechanisms. The discussion in the group provides an opportunity for the slow learn-

ers who have a good sense of expression to demonstrate their ability. The students even start to use a few dictionaries for any new expression they came across and hence develop the ability to use a dictionary. Through these student-centered activities, the students have learned to smoothly understand detailed instructions such as "write words carefully," "do not disturb others," and "review what you have learned today."

Application in Nonacademic School Activities: A Practical Application During a School Excursion.

In the final year at Japanese junior high schools there is a school excursion in which all students stay together for a couple of days. For this excursion, we created an activity with the aim of learning to what degree the students can communicate in English. The activity required students to speak to foreigners. The students were to make use of the things they had learned the previous two years. The object of the exercise was for students to interview foreigners about their first impressions of Japan. The students in principle ask a question of foreigners and receive a message back detailing their impressions. The aim of this activity was to cooperatively complete the task within a group consisting of 4 or 5 pupils as well as to challenge each individual's English ability.

Before the school excursion the students practiced greeting, asking questions, jotting down notes, and saying thanks. The teachers encouraged and motivated them. While some felt hesitant to speak with foreigners, some were optimistically interested in the task. It is important to motivate such students since they would then continue to have an independent learning habit.

The students cooperatively constructed sentences which they were to use in the interview; they also deepened their own understanding of Japanese culture and cooperatively refined questions. Because of the real-life purpose of having to speak in English, they learned seriously and positively.

When everything was ready, the students practiced dialogues in turns. The amazing thing was that they did it fairly, according to each individual's English ability. The Japanese and English teachers of English helped them as well.

That year we met many foreigners in Asakusa (Tokyo) and in Yokohama. Even though not all of them were native speakers of English, most of them spoke English fluently. In most of the cases, they willingly responded to the students saying "Excuse me."

For the students, realizing the value of English as a communication tool is a very significant and a joyful experience. There is now confidence in a future exchange program and for English learning in high school. These activities require a huge effort in preparation. The fundamental issue is how well the projects can enhance the students' motivation. Students seriously deal with the tasks and make an effort to succeed for the sake of concrete goals. The activity

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in the school excursion was meaningful to foster cooperative learning and give an opportunity to improve broad English ability.

Conclusion

We could recognize several characteristic changes and results by introducing Buzz Learning in the English class:

(1) The students' reading ability has dramatically improved.

(2) The students understand the tasks they are performing and their ability to learn by themselves has been also augmented.

(3) There are fewer students with an inferiority complex.

(4) The students learn out of curiosity and interest rather than just obligation.

As already mentioned, there are numerous problems with English education in Japan. I can however say that the difficulty of English learning has been reduced in my school. This method, which focuses on positive motivation of the students coupled with the fostering of good interpersonal relationships between the student and the teacher, is a successful mechanism to overcome English education problems at the junior high school level in Japan.

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